



# The writers group

BY CARMEN PEOTA

“The prompt tonight is ‘exhaustion,’” Bernard Trappey, MD, tells the handful of physicians gathered around a long wooden table in the back of a Minneapolis cafe.

For the next 30 minutes, the clicking of laptop keys is all that can be heard in the room. Finally, Trappey asks, “Who wants to share tonight?” Mike Aylward, MD, who coincidentally announced that tiredness “is the state of my life” earlier in the evening, reads a poem. A couple of people share essays, while two others opt to keep their writing to themselves.

It’s the monthly meeting of a physician writing group started a half dozen years ago by Trappey, then a resident and now a hospitalist at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, and Aylward, director

of the University of Minnesota’s Internal Medicine and Pediatrics residency program. Neither physician had formal training in writing. “It really was a selfish intent—just to be better writers ourselves,” Trappey says of their motivation for launching the group.

Trappey and Aylward also wanted to help residents reflect on what they were experiencing. “We wanted to have a safe space, almost an area of catharsis for residents who were going through challenging times and perhaps didn’t have the opportunity to gain perspective on them,” Aylward says.

Trappey took on the task of organizing the group and began to assemble a list of physicians he thought might be interested. A handful have shown up each month ever since. They’ve had as many as 12, with average attendance around five. The group meets from 6:30 to 8pm on Monday nights in a room with tall windows, an old fireplace and a brick wall decorated with 69-kilo burlap bags.

Initially, they followed a formal curriculum on writing. Trappey has since landed on a simpler format: he passes out copies of essays published in medical journals

along with a rubric for analyzing them. As a group, they dissect them. Is the piece effective? What do they like or dislike about the writing? “We’re just breaking them apart and trying to understand why doctors are writing what they’re writing—and what techniques are they using,” he says. Then the doctors spend time writing themselves.

At the April meeting, an essay from the *Annals of Internal Medicine* got a unanimous thumbs-down. The word play was overdone. The point wasn’t clear. One from *JAMA* fared better, but several people felt the ending wasn’t right. It could have ended two paragraphs earlier, someone suggested.

## Power of the pen

For frequent attendee Amanda Day, DO, a second-year resident in physical medicine and rehabilitation, the monthly gatherings are a chance to revive an old skill. She majored in journalism as an undergraduate. “When my friend told me about this, I thought it was a good opportunity to gain back some writing skills,” she says. The meetings provide a needed nudge. It’s hard to find time, otherwise, she says. “You always say, ‘Oh, I’ll do that or I can do that maybe tomorrow.’ Having that dedicated time forces you to do it.”

She’s found the discussions to be helpful as well, as she’s realized she’s not the only one in medicine to have questions and doubts. “Sometimes physicians are expected to know it all and be perfect and not make any mistakes,” she says. “But knowing that other people in your field feel the same way—it’s humanizing.”

Like Day, second-year med-peds resident Marta Michalska-Smith, MD, attends the writing group as often as she can. “Writing is something I’ve always liked and never done enough of,” she says. For her, the sessions are as much a time to take stock as to hone her literary skills. “It’s not just a place to work on my writing,” she says. “It’s a way to unpack my experiences and reorient myself in a way of reflection and intention.”

By writing about experiences, she better understands them. “I become more at-

tuned to the meaning and beauty in them,” she says. She believes the writing makes her more compassionate for both her patients and herself. “I think it’s very hard to do your job well if you’re not in a place of self-compassion and health,” she says.

Trappey says reflective writing can help physicians understand what they’re doing and why people react the way they do, deal with the stresses of medicine or work through a moral quandary. Yet he hesitates to say it’s something all physicians should do. “I think that reflective writing is a very powerful tool and important tool for people to have. But I know that it’s not something that everybody wants to do. I think it’s something that should be encouraged, but not forced.”

### Physicians writing for physicians

Over the years, Trappey and Aylward have become increasingly interested in the published pieces they discuss each month. They’ve noted that many share commonalities such as an ending that reveals

a lesson learned or a larger point. They explore certain themes—the hardships of residencies or being witness to death and dying, for example. As an offshoot of their involvement in the group, Aylward and Trappey are working with a colleague in the School of Rhetoric on a more formal analysis of a set of these physician-authored pieces.

What sets the articles apart from other literature, though, is their audience, which is other physicians. As such, they serve to remind doctors why they do what they do and offer assurance that they are not alone. “Physicians can see themselves in these pieces,” Aylward says.

And that is Aylward’s and Trappey’s hope for the physicians who gather each month in the Minneapolis café—that they might see themselves anew in the stories their own stories or those of others. **MM**

Carmen Peota is a Twin Cities freelance writer and editor.



## Story slam

Members of the writing group were among the 15 residents, fellows and faculty physicians who shared stories at a story “slam” last October. About 160 people attended the event, sponsored by Metro Minnesota Council on Graduate Medical Education and organized by a team that included Ben Trappey and others who participate in the writing group.

One of those who presented was Marta Michalska-Smith, MD, who told about being with her mother after her recent heart attack. “I was incredibly nervous,” she says. “But with the wonderful feedback we got ... it was kind of empowering.”

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